

Governor Haley Barbour
Katrina One -Year Anniversary Op-ed

A year ago, Mississippi was ground zero for the worst natural disaster in American history. On that day, August 29, 2005, as Hurricane Katrina raged along the Gulf Coast, Mississippi's future appeared bleak.

The storm's effect was complete, leaving miles and miles of unimaginable devastation that stretched from the coastline to more than 200 miles inland. In a single day, tens of thousands of homes were obliterated or rendered uninhabitable. Businesses built over generations were ruined in mere hours. Schools, churches, government buildings, highways, ports, railroads, water and sewer systems were all destroyed.

In the wake of that natural disaster, Mississippi was tested. And I am proud to report the state of Mississippi passed that test.

We are hardly done with our work, of course. We have in front of us a tall mountain that we've only begun to climb. It will take years before we can restore our coastline to its former beauty. Businesses remain shuttered. And for the families who lost loved ones, there will always be grief.

But in a year's time, we have succeeded in what is the largest reclamation project in the country since the end of the Civil War.

We have cleared almost all of the 45 million cubic yards of debris -- more than twice the amount left by Hurricane Andrew, which held the previous record.

We secured temporary housing faster than it has been done on such a grand scale, installing about 38,000 travel trailers and mobile homes, housing more than 103,000 Mississippians. True, some of our citizens have moved to other states, but most remained -- our six coastal counties have about 98 percent of their pre-Katrina population. In August, Mississippi schools began the new academic year at about 90 percent of pre-Katrina enrollment; in fact, all of the public schools on the Mississippi Coast re-opened within weeks of the storm.

Critical to our efforts from day one was a plan to get our economy back on its feet. Before the hurricane, Mississippi was seeing steady job gains and economic growth thanks to our Momentum Mississippi program, a major reform of our state workforce development and job training programs, a 25 percent cut in state payroll taxes, a doubling of support to community colleges for job training, and comprehensive tort reform which enabled businesses to spend more on creating jobs than to protect themselves from frivolous lawsuits.

Katrina threatened to flush away all that progress. Working with our key partners in the business community, state legislators and I worked on an aggressive effort to keep that economic momentum going. And our efforts are working.

There are now nearly 20,000 more Mississippians working today than we had at the start of 2004. In February, six months after Katrina, our employment levels eclipsed pre-hurricane levels. For the first time since 1929, Mississippi is no longer last in the country in per capita personal income.

Our ambitious business recruitment program is taking hold; in the first four months of 2006 the Mississippi Development Authority reported a total of 130 new and expanded projects.

Construction started last fall on SeverCorr's \$880 million state-of-the-art steel mill just outside Columbus. In February, airplane engine maker Rolls-Royce selected a site in Mississippi for its new outdoor engine-testing facility. And in June, General Electric Co. said it will build a composite jet engine factory here, creating 200 high-tech jobs. And many of our employers are increasing their commitment to the state. Along those lines in May I attended the groundbreaking of Viking Range Corp.'s dishwasher manufacturing plant in the Mississippi Delta town of Greenwood, a facility that will add 200 jobs.

We have many to thank for the progress we had made. Congress and the Bush Administration have been extraordinarily generous. This assistance included the Gulf Opportunity Zone Act, which is stimulating private investment -- 92 Mississippi companies have already applied for just more than \$3.5 billion out of \$4.9 billion set aside in tax-free bonds. These projects will help communities in 49 of Mississippi's 82 counties.

Of course, all of these efforts would mean nothing if not for the spirit of Mississippians. From the day the storm made landfall, our state has seen countless acts of courage, strength, resilience, and generosity.

And we could not have done it without the help of tens of thousands of volunteers from businesses, churches and other faith-based groups, non-profit organizations and college campuses who came- - and

are still coming -- from around the world to help. To all of them, I offer the gratitude of the entire state of Mississippi.

A year ago, in the aftermath of the most costly and devastating disaster in U.S. history, Mississippi was knocked down hard -- but we were never out. We're rebounding and rebuilding with the right policies, the right efforts, and a spirit that has proven stronger than the fiercest storm. I am very confident and optimistic that the best is yet to come.